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PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER
3 April 1982

Reagan adds to secrecy in documents

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Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Reagan signed an executive order yesterday that makes it easier for officials to stamp documents "secret," reversing a 30-year trend of giving the public more access to government files.

"It is essential for our citizens to be informed about their government's activities; but it is also essential to protect certain sensitive information when disclosure could harm the security of all our citizens," Reagan said in a statement accompanying the order.

The order replaces one signed by President Jimmy Carter in 1978 that placed new restrictions on use of the government secrecy stamp and insisted that secrecy be specifically balanced against the public's right to know.

The Reagan order, which will take effect in about 10 days and which went through several drafts in the last year, has been criticized by journalists and civil libertarians as granting government officials too much power to withhold information from the public.

The Reagan order:

- Allows classification of documents even if possible damage to national security is not "identifiable."

- Deletes Carter's mandate that officials must "determine whether the public interest in disclosure outweighs the damage to national security that might reasonably be expected from disclosure."

- Drops Carter's requirement that classified documents be reviewed

after six years with an eye toward releasing them unless their continued classification is required to protect national security.

- Creates a new area of classification: "the vulnerabilities or capabilities of systems, installations, projects or plans that relate to the national security." Critics claim this provision amounts to a "blank check" for the government to keep documents secret.

Sen. Daniel P. Moynihan of New York, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, said the panel had urged Reagan to keep Carter's requirement that damage to the national security be "identifiable" before information could be classified.

"Not to have done so was a mistake," Moynihan said.

But Sen. Barry M. Goldwater (R., Ariz.), the Intelligence Committee's chairman, called the order the "proper common-sense balance" between government secrecy and the need for a well-informed public.

"I have never subscribed to the notion that there are no enemies within the boundaries of our country," Goldwater said. "Truly sensitive information must be kept from them."

Rep. Glenn English (D., Okla.), chairman of the Government Operations information and individual rights subcommittee, said the Reagan order's overall message is "classify, classify, classify."

He said the order appears to expand greatly the amount of information that is subject to classification, and to increase the number of bureaucrats with authority to classify.

"The new executive order appears to have been designed primarily for the convenience of bureaucrats who want to hide their actions from the public," English said. "One can only assume that the mania for secrecy goes all the way to the top of the administration."

Senior administration officials said yesterday they did not believe the new order would lead to more docu-

ments being kept secret. But they said it would make it easier to block court challenges to their classification decisions.

At a White House briefing, the officials said the order would help reduce the perception in other countries that the U.S. government can be forced to give out critical intelligence information.

The officials said Carter's order had led to the release of some information that should have been kept secret, but they refused to identify the documents or give details.

Although broadening the government's power to control information, the final order reflects a retreat from earlier proposals.

Unlike a previous draft, the order signed by Reagan keeps Carter's requirement that classified documents be marked section by section as to their sensitivity. Earlier drafts of the order had allowed entire documents to be classified even if only parts contained sensitive information.

The final order also backed off a proposal that would have required documents to be classified at the highest possible level even if there was reasonable doubt about the need to keep the document secret.

The order states that in such cases, the documents should be safeguarded as if classified for 30 days while an appropriate official determines what secrecy classification to apply.

Previous orders dating to the Nixon administration had insisted that where there was reasonable doubt, the document should not be classified or the lowest possible secrecy level should be applied.

Like the Carter order, Reagan's order has three levels of classifications: top secret, secret and confidential. It also retains the requirement that secrecy not be used to cover up waste or wrongdoing.

A group called the Reporters' Committee complained that Reagan's order "will prevent the press historians, academicians, researchers and other citizens from obtaining information about foreign affairs, intelligence and defense planning."